

## ISSUE NO. 12

## Radical Imagination And The Left Hand of Darkness

## Tuesday Smillie

Abstract: “Radical Imagination and *The Left Hand of Darkness*” considers creative practice as crucial in the process of world building. Looking to Ursula K. Le Guin as a model for imagination as a radical practice we find that the critical question is how we proceed as our failures become clear.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Photo-1.png>)

Imagining is a radical practice. Ursula K. Le Guin displays the potential of this practice in her classic feminist science fiction novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In the novel, Le Guin constructs a world inhabited by a brown, androgynous, gender-fluid human population. While the novel itself has an awkward, dated deconstruction of gender, Le Guin’s use of her imagination as a radical tool and her earnest attempt to evoke new, undetermined ways of being is deeply inspiring. *The Left Hand of Darkness* and the subsequent evolution in Le Guin’s thinking around gender and identity offer a strategic reference point for those of us attempting to envision and actualize new social and cultural configurations. Le Guin engages in a public process of autocritique, suggesting

a means to consider the messy, problematic process of attempting to materialize a new world and new modes of social exchange, having been steeped in the hierarchies of our evolving culture.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* was first published in 1969. The novel takes place on the planet Gethen, which is in the midst of an ice age. Gethen has a humanoid population, consisting almost exclusively of brown skinned, non-gendered, and non-sexed people. Through the omission of light skinned people, Le Guin negates the racialized hierarchies painfully familiar to humans on Earth. Periodically Gethenians go into heat, a stage they call kemmer. Once in kemmer they develop distinctly sexed reproductive organs and gendered attributes in response to their interactions and flirtations with those around them. As a white transgender woman invested in racial and social justice, reading *The Left Hand of Darkness* felt like a gift. This world of malleable gender, free from racialized differentiation offers a respite from the rigidly defined and violently enforced systems of racism and binary gender currently found in the United States and in many cultures on Earth.

The novel presents a world with no societal gender norms, without racially stratified or sexualized bodies, and a world in which bodies are inherently gender-fluid. *The Left Hand of Darkness* destabilizes the idea of gender as a knowable entity, while subverting racist depictions of black and brown individuals and communities. Le Guin's writing questions the essential nature of gender and its complex relationship to race, decades before related conversations would be publicly articulated by contemporary transfeminists.[1] I read *The Left Hand of Darkness* as being part of an opening into a transfeminist analysis. From this vantage, I read *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a proto-transfeminist text.

Le Guin's use of her creative practice is courageous. She has referred to the novel as a "thought experiment," writing, "I eliminated gender to find out what was left. What ever was left would be, presumably, simply human." [2] Imagination here is a radical, exploratory tool. Le Guin uses her writing to reach beyond the constructs of gender and race, looking for the "simply human." At the same time, she projects an alternative configuration of how human societies might look. Le Guin uses her practice to write her way into another world.

Despite the potency of Le Guin's radical gesture, there are a number of ways in which *The Left Hand of Darkness* fails to critically engage the heteronormative gender binary Le Guin set out to interrogate. This can be seen in Le Guin's construction of life on

Gethen. The most glaring of these problematics is her consistent use of male pronouns to identify non-gendered characters. In Le Guin's defense, the bulk of the novel is told from the perspective of humans from worlds where gender-binaries are the cultural norm. These humans apparently had difficulty thinking of Gethenians outside of the gendered roles of their home worlds. Still, given the anthropologic air of the text, it is surprising and disappointing that there is not a richer conversation about the use of pronouns and lack of verbal and cultural gendered signifiers on Gethen.

Le Guin also placed limitations on the physical configuration of human bodies on Gethen. When entering kemmer, individuals only develop gendered characteristics within an either/or, male/female gendered binary. Gethenians do not develop physical sexed attributes on a spectrum. There is no mention of characteristics from disparate poles of the gender binary coexisting. This regimentation reinforces societal norms found on Earth that claim only two scientifically identifiable sexes exist, erasing a rich biological spectrum of chromosomal and hormonal difference. Within this strictly defined physical construction of Gethenian bodies in kemmer, Le Guin also insists that these bodies only develop sexed characteristics in heterosexual pairings. Despite the inherent queerness of Gethenian biology, Le Guin preemptively excludes any homosexual exchanges.

The lack of gendered social roles and the possibility that any individual can carry and birth a child has led family structures to take on a much more communal shape on Gethen than say, the idealized nuclear family of the United States in the 1950s. Le Guin indicates that neighborhoods and villages have something of a collectivized, interwoven social structure. In contrast to this communal social body at the local level, the two forms of government found on Gethen are a monarchy and a bureaucracy. Given that Le Guin is exploring "what was left" beyond the constructs of race and gender, her inclusion of these familiar forms of government suggests that they are somehow inherently human rather than the product of hierarchically defined cultures. Arguably, a society with such a communal social structure would have developed unique governing entities.

Beyond the assertion that Gethenians are brown and our alien protagonist is somewhat darker than most Gethenians, there is little in the novel that directly engages questions of race. In this regard, Le Guin appears to have taken a post-racial position. She names her characters' brownness and then proceeds to tell her story without reference to race. In the context of science fiction's overwhelming whiteness, particularly in the United

States during the '60s and '70s, Le Guin's dismissal of racialized hierarchies, simply through the omission of white people, is a powerful gesture. Her post-racial perspective is a logical vantage to take for a world with minimal racial differentiation. However, Earth's history, of a violently implemented European gender binary on a global scale through colonial domination, leaves me wishing the novel had done more.**[3]** This historical narrative of Europe's dissemination and enforcement of cultural norms seems particularly pertinent to the premise of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in which an envoy from a confederation of worlds with cultures imbued with binary gender seeks to envelope a non-binary world. To be clear, the meeting of worlds Le Guin constructs is radically different from the extreme violence of European colonialism; this, too, is a powerful negation of Earth's historical hierarchies. There is potency, though, in the proximity of these two distinct realities, one fictional and one factual. Le Guin could have used the correlating elements in these narratives to mine the interweaving of a heteronormative gender binary, racism, and colonialism on Earth.**[4]**

*The Left Hand of Darkness* was published in the midst of second wave feminism in the United States. This situates Le Guin's writing in a specific cultural context: one in which college educated, white women dominated the discourse around feminism, promoting an essentialist dialog that positioned men and women as holding inherent differences, while erasing the significance of race and class as pertinent factors in one's socialization and lived experience. The influence of this historical moment provides context for some of the limitations of imagination found in the novel.

The critical reception of *The Left Hand of Darkness* was initially mixed, with criticism coming from patriarchs of the science fiction community and feminists alike.**[5]** These critiques tended to center on Le Guin's insistent use of male pronouns for androgynous peoples and on her presentation of Gethenians as masculine, if not male. In the essay "The Image of Women in Science Fiction," writer and feminist Joanna Russ takes issue with the central narration of the novel being told by a cis-gendered man. She concedes that Le Guin's use of "he" is an unfortunate necessity, given English's lack of a singular, gender-neutral pronoun, but Russ faults Le Guin for constructing Gethenians as "masculine in gender, if not in sex."**[6]** The prominent science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem also finds fault in Le Guin's construction and portrayal of Gethenians as primarily masculine. In a critical reading of the novel, he presents a painfully heteronormative perspective, asserting that humans' understanding of ourselves as concretely sexed and gendered beings is imperative to a society's well-being. As summarized in her book *Dancing with Dragons: Ursula K. Le Guin And the Critics*, Donna White writes, "Lem

finds the novel psychologically unsound because the Gethenians' constant gender changes should wreak havoc on relationships and personal identity.”[7]

Critics and academics have written extensively about Le Guin's work. *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which was awarded both the Nebula Award and the Hugo Award, marked a turning point in Le Guin's reception and her career. The novel continues to be the subject of much critical analysis.[8] Gender is one of the main points of discussion in these writings, along with the novel's unique narrative structure, the anthropological air of the text, and the influence of Le Guin's Taoist practice on the worlds and stories she creates. In contrast, Le Guin's repeated construction of worlds with prominent black and brown cultures, and stories centering black and brown protagonists, has received surprisingly little attention. This may be due to limitations in the racial imagination of Le Guin and her predominantly white critics alike. Le Guin's telling of *The Left Hand of Darkness* opens the question: What does it mean to have black and brown protagonists in a world without race?

In 1976, Le Guin responded to the critiques Russ, Lem, and a wave of others had leveled against *The Left Hand of Darkness* with the analytical essay, “Is Gender Necessary?” Throughout the essay, Le Guin takes a defensive position, staunchly defending the choices she made in her construction of Gethen and its inhabitants. She opens the essay by attempting to distance herself from the politicized nature of the novel, stating that she “was not a theoretician, a political thinker or activist, or a sociologist. I was and am a fiction writer.”[9] Le Guin goes on to assert that “he” is English's singular gender-neutral pronoun, without naming the patriarchal power structure imbedded in such language. She does, however, state, “I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for “he/she.”[10] Le Guin's use of “mangle” here is particularly painful, invoking an ableist narrative, which claims the gender binary is a *perfect, natural* body to be cherished and protected from the *detrimental, damaging* effects of gender expressions outside of its purview. I find Le Guin's utter refusal to explore alternatives to the use of “he” particularly curious. While she literally creates universes out of thin air, Le Guin cannot imagine creating a singular, gender-neutral pronoun.

Responding to criticism about the formation of governmental bodies on Gethen, Le Guin concedes that she could have been more creative: “I doubt that Gethenian governments, rising out of the cellular hearth, would resemble any of our own so closely. They might be better, they might be worse, but they would certainly be different.”[11] She does not address the questions of biological binaries or of her

enforcement of heterosexuality, but it should be noted that neither of these critiques had been raised at the time.

Le Guin's defensive positioning makes "Is Gender Necessary?" a deeply disappointing document from a transfeminist perspective, but not an entirely surprising one. Given the antagonism of the criticism leveled against her, I can understand her defensive posture. The science fiction writer Alexei Panshin, for one, called the novel "a flat failure," citing Le Guin's use of masculine pronouns.<sup>[12]</sup> Furthermore, the dominant vanguard voices in conversations of gender and feminism in the United States in the 1970s belonged to cis-gendered white women, who privileged essentialist gender narratives. From this cultural context, it would have been remarkable if Le Guin, herself a heterosexual, cis-gendered, white woman, had evoked a more radical conversation around gender, race, and identity. In reading *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a proto-transfeminist text, I credit the novel as being part of opening conversations of gender, race, and identity that would develop into a critical vantage point utilized in this essay.

Twelve years later, in 1988, Le Guin returned to "Is Gender Necessary?" The resulting document, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" clearly traces her shifting perspectives and opinions. In this text, Le Guin maintains the original essay, "Is Gender Necessary?" in its entirety, but adds extensive footnotes. The revised document has a bifurcated format with the 1976 text running in a column on the left and the footnotes from 1988 running in their own column on the right.

In her footnote addendums, Le Guin does not directly comment on her attempts to distance herself from the politicized nature of the project she undertook with *The Left Hand of Darkness*, by asserting that she "was not a theoretician, a political thinker or activist," but the essay as a whole does honor the socially situated political significance of the novel. <sup>[13]</sup> Le Guin concedes that new, singular, gender-neutral pronouns are needed in English. She also highlights that prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they/them/their were commonly used as genderless singular pronouns. In readings and in a screenplay from 1985, Le Guin notes that she has used the invented pronouns a/un/a's. As of 1988, however, it was still hard for her to imagine utilizing such pronouns in print.<sup>[14]</sup>

Le Guin apologetically acknowledges that she locked Gethenians into heterosexuality. She states that this was based on a "naively pragmatic view of sex," and asserts that homosexual activities would transpire on Gethen and that, without a rigidly gendered society, homosexual practices would be widely accepted.<sup>[15]</sup> This admission is likely in

response to more recent criticism of the 1980s like the article “Again, *The Left Hand of Darkness*: Androgyny or Homophobia?” by Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana Veith, published just two years prior to “Redux.”**[16]**

In neither the original text nor the “Redux” does Le Guin comment on race in the novel. The essay responds to the novel’s critics and race, as far as I have seen, was not part of the critical dialog surrounding the work. Given the context, this omission is not glaring, but its absence in the critical reception of her work highlights the whiteness of the science fiction community (particularly in the 1970s), the whiteness of second wave feminism, and the whiteness of academia. Its absence from Le Guin’s own reflections suggests the limited scope of her post-racial project.

“Is Gender Necessary? Redux” does not present us with a politic perfectly aligned with a contemporary transfeminist perspective, but as a strategy it offers cultural critics something more useful. Le Guin’s public process of autocritique is powerful. She takes ownership of her mistakes and does so on a platform in which her readers can trace and consider the evolution of her thinking. Le Guin self-critically engages with her creative practice and her past works, both in response to her critics and as her worldview shifts and expands. Through the public nature of this process, Le Guin invites her readers to interrogate their own opinions, cultivating a dynamic field of critical analysis.

In 1995, Le Guin published the short story “Coming of Age in Karhide.”**[17]** The story also takes place on Gethen, though a couple centuries after *The Left Hand of Darkness*. “Coming of Age in Karhide” offers a satisfying revisit to Gethen. With this story, Le Guin implements a number of her conclusions from “Is Gender Necessary? Redux” and does so by building on the world she’d constructed instead of rewriting it. She does not use an invented pronoun, but rather manages to gracefully avoid pronouns almost entirely for Gethenians who are not in kemmer by identifying characters by name and by familial or social relation. “Coming of Age in Karhide” presents a richly developed window into the communal process of childrearing and the interweaving of communities into networks of extended family. Le Guin also provides her readers a window into a kemmer-house, in which the story’s narrator does indeed partake in homosexual exchange.

“Coming of Age in Karhide” clearly displays Le Guin’s willingness to thoughtfully engage with the criticisms of her work. This string of texts, from *The Left Hand of Darkness* to “Is Gender Necessary?” to “Is Gender Necessary? Redux,” and finally

“Coming of Age in Karhide,” traces Le Guin’s evolving thinking around gender and identity in detail, highlighting her commitment to her creative practice as an exploration of other worlds and other/ed social configurations. These texts also reflect larger shifts in feminist thinking and broader cultural changes in the United States. The trajectory of this narrative showcases how deeply held beliefs can and do evolve over time when we remain receptive and creative.

There is a compelling passage in *The Left Hand of Darkness* describing Ai and Estraven, the protagonists in the novel, perilously attempting to cross the Gobrin Glacier. Extreme circumstances have forced them into this situation and they are uncertain if they will survive. The weather conditions of the glacier create an environment in which there are no shadows. Ai describes the difficulty of attempting to transverse the tundra without any shadows to show depth:

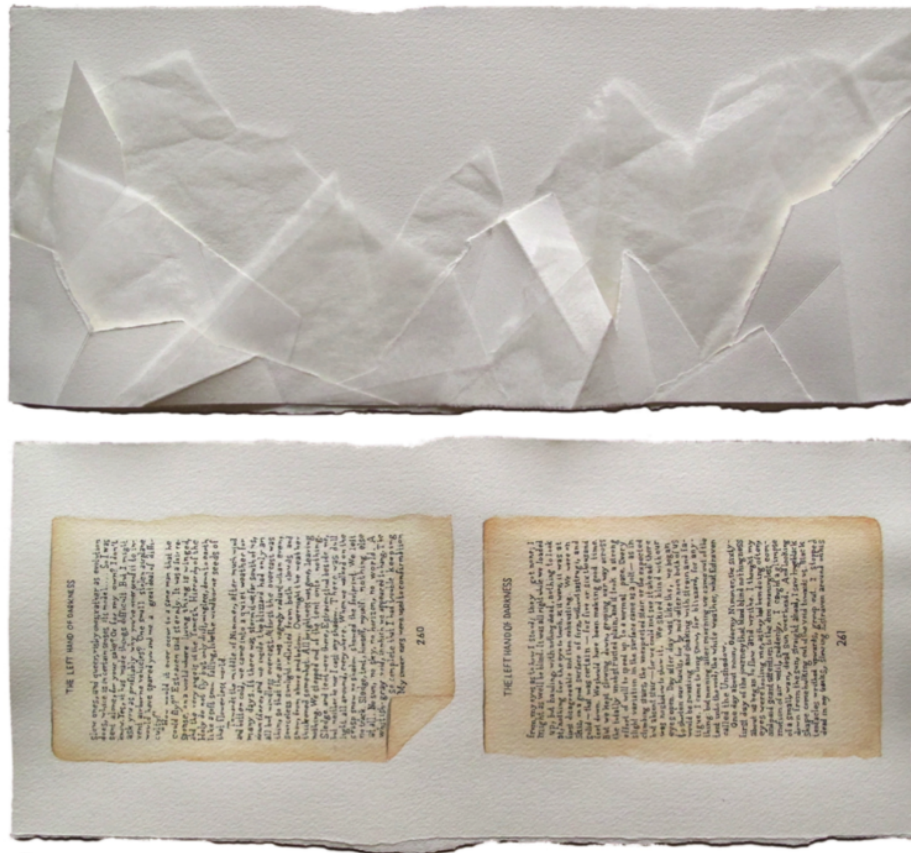
*Overnight the weather thickened somewhat. All brightness was gone, leaving nothing. We stepped out of the tent onto nothing. Sledge and tent were there, Estraven stood beside me, but neither he nor I cast any shadow. There was dull light all around, everywhere. When we walked on the crisp snow no shadow showed the footprint. We left no track... We should have been making good time. But we kept slowing down, groping our way across the totally unobstructed plain, and it took a strong effort of will to speed up to a normal pace. Every slight variation in the surface came as a jolt – as in climbing stairs, the unexpected stair or the expected but absent stair – for we could not see it ahead: there was no shadow to show it.[18]*

This description of a frustrated attempt to move forward toward a shared future goal feels familiar. It resonates with community based efforts to build a shared politic and it resonates with movements striving to dismantle and restructure systems of power. We push forward not knowing exactly how we are going to get *there* or where exactly *there* even is. We are so steeped in the violence of our present socio-political circumstance that it can be hard to envision or understand what our end goal tangibly looks like. But we try with each step, not knowing where our foot will land: sometimes we hit the unexpected stair, sometimes we miss, sometimes we use male pronouns for a planet full of beautiful androgynons and get called out by our peers. We keep trying, because we are hungry for a just world.

Le Guin’s use of her imagination as a radical practice is deeply inspiring. Early in her career, she embraced a politicized practice of world building. With *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she deliberately negates racialized and gendered hierarchical social



structures found on Earth in an attempt to feel her way toward what such a world could be like. The construction of Gethen and its inhabitants is far from flawless, but Le Guin offers us something more valuable than a piece of fiction that mirrors a specific politic: she dares to dream and allows that dream to grow and evolve. To build another world, we must first be brave enough to imagine how that world could be, knowing we will make profound mistakes in the process. By looking to Le Guin's practice as a model, we find that the radical act is how we proceed as our failure becomes clear.



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Tuesday Smillie

*Gobrin Glacier, 2014*

Collage, watercolor, ink on paper

7" x 15 1/2" each

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**[1]** In "The Transfeminist Manifesto," activist and rogue intellectual Emi Koyama defines transfeminism at its core as "a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond." Koyama, "The Transfeminist Manifesto," 245. I appreciate the broad reaching inclusivity of this statement, but I would like to explicitly state that to achieve "the liberation of all women and beyond" we must recognize the intersecting overlay of various systems of power and prioritize the safety and wellbeing of those most vulnerable to state and social violence, in both concrete and abstract forms.

**[2]** Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," In *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, edited by Susan Wood. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992. 160.

**[3]** The practice of gendercide enacted by Spanish colonizers of the Americas targeting culturally established and accepted third-gender peoples in indigenous communities is a pertinent example. For a queer analysis of this history specific to the American

Indian tribes of what would become California, see “Extermination of the *Joyas*: Gendercide in Spanish California” by Deborah A. Miranda.

**[4]** Le Guin grew up in California and her father was a cultural anthropologist who worked with local American Indian tribes. It does not seem a far reach for her to have had some access to histories like those told by Miranda.

**[5]** Donna R. White, *Dancing with Dragons: Ursula K. Le Guin and the Critics*. Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1999. 47.

**[6]** Joanna Russ, “The Image of Women in Science Fiction,” In *Images of Women in Fiction; Feminist Perspectives*, edited by Susan Koppelman Cornillon. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press. 90.

**[7]** White, *Dancing with Dragons*, 47.

**[8]** Much of this history is outlined in White, *Dancing with Dragons*.

**[9]** Le Guin, “Is Gender Necessary? Redux,” 156.

**[10]** Ibid., 169.

**[11]** Ibid.

**[12]** White, *Dancing with Dragons*, 47.

**[13]** Le Guin, “Is Gender Necessary? Redux,” 156.

**[14]** Ibid., 170.

**[15]** Ibid., 169.

**[16]** White, *Dancing with Dragons*, 72.

**[17]** Le Guin, “Coming of Age in Karhide,” In *The Birthday of the World and Other Stories*. New York: Perennial, 2003.

**[18]** Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 260-261.

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**Tuesday Smillie** (<https://adanewmedia.org/author/smilletuesday>)

Tuesday Smillie is a visual artist and critical thinker, living and working in Brooklyn NY. At the core of her work is a question about the individual and the group: the binary of inclusion and exclusion. This focus undoubtedly stems from Smillie's experience navigating the world as a transgender woman. Her work has shown throughout the United States. In New York City she has shown at The New Museum, Artist Space Books, Judson Church, and the A.I.R. Gallery. She has a forth-coming solo exhibition at the non-profit gallery Participant Inc.



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